

1972: NORMAN MAILER PARTIES WITH OFFBEAT TAMPANS

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IT WAS A CHILLY FEBRUARY EVENING IN TAMPA and the perfume of the citrus trees was almost oppressive. The numbers of cars parked on both sides of the house stretched down the block and beyond the house. There was one helluva party going on at the corner residence.

The guests were mostly faculty members from the University of South Florida's humanities departments, including Philosophy, Music, Humanities, History, American Studies, and Art. The majority of the English department was there, as anticipated. A guest of honor of the stature of Norman Mailer was a rare event.

The party house was a strange scene, indeed. There was not a stick of furniture in any room and the floors supported nothing else. The kitchen housed only a keg of beer, potato chips, pretzels, and cups. The smell of the Sun State's citrus blossoms was overpowered by the stench of discarded cigarettes and beer on the floor. The air was heavy with smoke and noise from a myriad of cacophonous, simultaneous conversations. The scene was smoky and roaring.

Willie Reader, poet and English professor, furiously paced the room.

Norman Mailer suddenly entered the foggy scene. Mailer arrived with a horde of 1960s enthusiasts and activists. As he entered, Mailer's eyes appeared to slowly scan the room, like a military scout trying to make sense of what he saw in this surreal, raucous setting.

Mailer was introduced to attentive academics, who were scattered throughout the room: Jim Parrish, chair of English, speaking southern drawl, remarked how pleased he was to meet the author of *The Naked and the Dead* and *An American Dream*. Professors Fabry, Iorio, Spillane, and

Moore eagerly shook hands with the celebrated author and public intellectual. The restless crowd was standing in a sea of beer and cigarette butts, and it appeared that the house was being trashed by a gang of renegade party crashers. Mailer asked Moore about the seemingly unusual scene.

“No, no, no,” said Moore. “Quite the opposite. This is a celebration of a party that occurred two and a half months ago, appropriately named J. Newman’s Party. Let me tell you about that gathering. It was not like this one. We were all dressed up. Even had a bartender. It was a formal occasion.”

Mailer listened attentively as Moore told him the story of the previous event and its connection to this evening’s festivities.

Two months earlier guests arrived one evening for an academic house party. The next door neighbor, “Joe,” came out and told people not to park in front of his house. He then accosted Jacque Abrams, a concert pianist who was a little man. Joe lifted Abrams off his feet as if he were a small child. At that exact moment, John Iorio, professor and ex-paratrooper, rushed out of his car and to his friend’s rescue. John was about to show Joe the reason why he was known as a tough World War II warrior. With a lightning right to Joe’s jaw, Iorio saved Abrams. Joe staggered backward and then swiftly scrambled to the safety of his house.

The year was 1972, close to the era of the civil rights movement and, from what could be surmised, Joe was apparently angered by Newman’s practice of inviting groups of blacks to his home. Joe, a drinker who also was known to be violent, returned to the front door some two hours later—drunk and demanding the arrest of Iorio. He then threw a few errant punches at Newman, who decked him. The sheriff was called and Joe was taken away to sleep it off.

The party continued, but Newman was concerned about what would happen when Joe sobered up and returned—would Newman’s wife and children be safe? Eureka—there was a plan! Joe’s house had been for sale. Using a doctor-colleague as a front, Newman bought the house. Tonight’s party—also the Mailer party—was a celebration of the sale of the house. Willie Reader had arranged to be the ultimate buyer, thus explaining his furious pacing off every inch of every room.

Mailer's reaction to Moore's somewhat offbeat explanation was utterly non-quizzical. Mailer, clearly relaxed, gave the impression that he was quite familiar with this kind of academic scene, disjointed chronology, and pugilism. Mailer calmly listened to the detailed story with a look of admiration when the Iorio scene was replayed, as if Iorio reminded Mailer—perhaps—of himself. Mailer's reputation as a savvy, skilled boxer, who did not suffer fools gladly, was well known in that house.

Mailer now knew the history of this unorthodox scene. He seemed to be amused that this evening—Mailer's night—was also the celebration of a bigot's departure from the neighborhood.

Once Mailer knew the narrative behind the setting, he walked over to me—beer in hand and wearing a big smile—grabbed my shoulder and said “good show.” It might be said that a cold night in 1972 was the beginning of a long, warm relationship between Norman Mailer and the University of South Florida.